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Cannon pushes for sell-off of unused fed land

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WASHINGTON - Failures by the federal government to manage the vast expanses of land it owns in the West have created severe hardships for the region, Western House Republicans said Wednesday.

They urged Bush administration officials to right their ship - doing a better job managing their land and fully compensating Western counties for lost tax revenue - before buying additional federal lands.

"It doesn't make any sense whatsoever to acquire new lands when you're not taking care of the land we already own," Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, told federal land managers at a House Resources subcommittee hearing.

Cannon said the federal government should identify its surplus land and devote as much effort to getting rid of the land as it does to buying new land. He is sponsoring a bill requiring a comprehensive mapping of federal land and selling off those areas no longer needed.

The federal government manages about 671 million acres, overwhelmingly concentrated in Western states. Roughly two-thirds of the entire state of Utah is under federal ownership - although Cannon said the federal records are so sloppy, nobody knows an actual figure.

The Western lawmakers also criticized the Bush administration's proposal to cut \$27 million, or 12 percent, from the Payment-In-Lieu-of-Taxes (PILT) program, designed to compensate states for tax revenues lost due to federal ownership. The House reversed the proposed cuts and raised the funding to \$242 million. The Senate has approved \$235 million. They will negotiate the final figure.

"Many of those rural counties in the West really depend on this PILT funding," said Rep. Tom Udall, D-N.M. "It may be an abstract notion back here in Washington, but it's an important reality for counties providing services."

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, plugged the APPLE Initiative, an idea hatched by Utah legislators to require the federal government to fully compensate states for property taxes lost because of federal ownership. Western states have the largest school class sizes and the most difficulty raising money because the federal ownership undermines the states' tax bases. The proposal would mean an estimated \$116 million for Utah education.

"The education of our children in the West is being harmed," Bishop said. "Everybody in the West is impacted by this, especially the kids."

Garfield County Commission Chairman Maloy Dodds said economic development in his county is hampered because the federal government owns 90 percent of the land. Tourism brings in money, but creates costs as well. Last year, the county hired two new sheriff deputies at \$150,000, and upgraded its landfill for \$200,000.